Teaching English Language in the Communicative Classroom through the Study of Literary Texts

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Introduction

This article examines the teaching of literature in English in the communicative EFL classroom, with particular focus on practical application at the university level. This article is intended as a basic overview for the reader who has not previously surveyed the published research in the area of teaching literature in the communicative language teaching (CLT) classroom. The two areas of primary concern are 1) the rationale for teaching English language through literature, and 2) effective methodology. In regard to rationale, emphasis is placed on the ideas of Collie and Slater, who in 1987 posited four key reasons for using literary texts in the CLT context; subsequent research in this area has routinely used these ideas as a starting point. This is followed by an examination of recommended criteria for selecting appropriate and effective literary texts for use in the communicative language teaching (CLT) context. Last, with regard to methodology, particular attention is paid to the "Literary Circles" movement that has been growing in popularity for the past decade and which can be used successfully as the foundation for a fully integrated "four skills" approach to teaching literature in the EFL classroom.

Background: Literature in Communicative Language Teaching

The fundamental question of the appropriateness of using literary texts as the base of instruction and learning in communicative language classes has been widely debated for at least the past three decades. Prior to the 1980s, literature was taught primarily in the traditional manner in EFL classes; teachers delivered L1 lectures in which they transmitted biographical information about authors and historical facts about their times, followed by close reading of the text, and then students took written examinations that primarily tested comprehension, interpretation, and analysis of various aspects of the text itself. As Hall (2015) has outlined in a chapter entitled "Literature in Education," the emergence of CLT in the 1980s also ushered in a new approach to literary texts in which students take part in a variety of communicative activities meant to engage them directly in the consideration of the meaning and stylistics of a literary work and in assuming active roles as communicators in L2 as they contemplate the work and discuss their own personal connections with the themes and issues presented in the text (Hall 2015: 99–154). In considering the justifications for teaching literature in the communicative classroom, it might serve well to consider the following question: "Why can't we approach literature, culture, and language as naturally intertwined? If we do not integrate civilization, literature, and language in a concerted way, we will get only a veneer of language, literary or cultural appreciation" (Barnett 1991).

The Case for Literature in the Communicative EFL Classroom: Major Advocates

Viewed in historical perspective, it is clear that the most influential published works in support of using literary texts in the communicative EFL classroom have been the following: 1) Collier and Slater (1987); 2) Maley (1989); and 3) Ur (1991). As I will closely examine Collier and Slater's key statements below, I will here only remark that nearly all substantial research in the past three decades has drawn from their landmark findings. With respect to Maley and Ur, it will be sufficient for our current purposes to briefly survey their key assertions.

Collie and Slater: The Literature and Language Paradigm Begins to Shift

Establishing what have come to be regarded as four pillars of rationale for teaching English language through the use of literary texts, Collie and Slater (1987) posited the following benefits: 1) valuable authentic material; 2) cultural enrichment; 3) language enrichment; and 4) personal involvement. An examination of each of these reasons for using literary texts in the CLT context will serve to reflect the mainstream of subsequent research findings and the core of pedagogy concerning literature in language education (LLE) over the past 30 years.

Authentic Material

Noting that literature is "authentic" material in the sense that literary texts are not fabricated for the specific purpose of teaching language,

Collie and Slater underscore Morrow's earlier pronouncement that "an authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort" (Morrow 1977: 13). Collie and Slater go on to assert that literature "offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is 'important' in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues, and which is enduring rather than ephemeral" (Collie and Slater 1987: 3). Along these same lines, Maley states that prominent literary themes such as death, love, human relationships, belief, and nature are not bound by culture or time, and that in works of literature these themes are treated in virtually unlimited ways by different authors (Maley 1989: 12). In other words, literary texts can and should be employed in the CLT environment precisely because they generate genuine opportunities for meaningful L2 communication (both spoken and written). Stressing the significance of interest and motivation for EFL students, Widdowson draws a sharp contrast between the use of literature as subject matter in CLT contexts and the traditional situational/utilitarian "conversation topics" that continue to serve as the conceptual paradigm for many CLT textbooks: "It's not easy to see how learners at any level can get interested in and therefore motivated by a dialogue about buying stamps at a post office. There is no plot, no mystery, there is no character; everything proceeds as if communication never created a problem. There's no misunderstanding, and there's no possibility of any kind of interaction. What happens is that learners simply mouth the sentences of their parts, and you don't get them interested in what they are doing" (Widdowson 1983: 33).

Another seminal work from the 1980s, *Literature and Language Teaching* by Brumfit and Carter, unambiguously advocates the inclusion of works of literature among the types of teaching materials to be used in

CLT classes: "A literary text is authentic text, real language in context, to which we can respond directly" (Brumfit and Carter 1986: 15). This matter of response leads naturally to what I take to be the critical issue with regard to the question of authenticity: effectiveness. My own view aligns with Alex Gilroy's conclusions regarding authenticity of materials used in ESL/EFL. Gilroy's work in this area has done much to bolster arguments supporting the use of literary texts in the CLT context. He forcefully argues that

> "The question should not be: 'Is this text "authentic"?' but 'What role do I want the text to play in the learning process?' We should be looking not for some abstract concept of 'authenticity,' but rather the practical concept of 'fitness to the learning purpose.' The key issue then becomes 'What are we trying to achieve with classroom materials?' A logical response to this would be that the goal is to produce learners who are able to communicate effectively in the target language of a particular speech community, that is to say, learners who are *communicatively competent*."
>
> (Gilroy 2007: 99; emphases in the original).

With specific regard to literary texts being used as source material in the CLT context, I would prefer that the standard of acceptability shift from the abstract concept of "authenticity" to the practical concerns of "appropriateness" and "effectiveness." The crucial questions for teachers, then, would be as follows: 1) "Are these materials (i.e., literary texts) appropriate for my students in regard to comprehensibility (both in terms of language and culture) and interest?" and 2) "Are these materials likely to be effective for implementing communicative activities, tasks, and testing, and ultimately for meeting the objectives for these students in this

particular course?"

Cultural Enrichment

Language is part of culture, and culture part of language. That is why many EFL teachers emphasize the contribution and incorporation of the teaching of culture into the foreign language classroom. For instance, in discussing the roles that literary studies in CLT classes can play with regard to cultural enrichment, Collie and Slater grant from the start that the ideal way for students to deepen their understanding of life in a foreign country is to go there for an extended visit, which of course is impossible for the majority of language learners (Collie and Slater 1987: 4). Among more indirect routes to understanding other cultures, they suggest, is the study of a country's literary works, which offer a "full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted" in an "imagined world [that] can quickly give the reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society" (Collie and Slater 1987: 4). It is true that people learn a foreign language to study its literature, one of the main media of culture, but it is now a thing of the past: as the number of people who love literature has decreased, so students of a foreign language who learn for the purpose of literature have been on the decline. To make things worse, an increasing number of younger people are not interested in or do not read literature due to aliteracy.(1)

In spite of these adverse conditions, literature can still be a key to increasing the number of second language learners. Through a translated version of a literary text, some readers can find the dynamism of a foreign culture, gain, and understand the perspectives of others. One great example is the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, whose novels have been translated into 42 languages.(2) People speaking other languages are

"lured" into studying the Japanese language by Murakami's novels. This "Murakami Phenomenon" tells us a lot about the affinity between language and literature as well as a novel's role as a "mediator between Japanese and Western culture" (Suter). Indeed, while reading Murakami, a Japanese reader is often faced with literature and ideas that (s)he may have otherwise never encountered: Raymond Chandler, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Duke Ellington, and the Beatles. Most of them have long been dead and lived in foreign countries. In the same way, a "Harukist" in a foreign land finds the Japanese culture depicted in Murakami's works interesting and enticing. They, Japanese readers as well as foreign readers of Murakami, understand the perspectives of others and are offered the opportunity to reflect on their own perspectives. This is a culture-oriented reading and teaching: Temporal and geographical distance can be easily shortened and made to disappear, as Lazar notes that

> "it is also true that texts which may appear to be very remote in time and place from the world today may still have appeal for students in different countries around the world. This is either because they touch on themes which are relevant to the students, or because they deal with human relationships and feelings which strike a chord in the students' own lives." (1993: 53; see Lazar Table (3))

While there are benefits of cross-cultural understanding for language learners, experienced teachers are well aware of the challenges in teaching and learning about culture through literary studies. Stated simply, students with limited cultural frame of reference will face more challenges when it comes to understanding and interpreting the customs, values, and cultural issues that are part of a literary text. Yet, as Hall observes, "the fact that readers of another culture and language's litera-

ture may have difficulties processing both linguistically and culturally is not of course an argument for not using such texts at all. It is rather a reminder of the difficulties for a teacher to anticipate" (Hall 2015: 93). This reminds us of the importance of a teacher in the CLT classroom. The significance of understanding cultural issues for language learners is made clear in Hall's assertion that "Cultural factors can be more important than linguistic factors in comprehension" (Hall 2015: 91). We should note that culture is not static — it is constantly changing; it is a dynamic system of symbols and meanings, and without the knowledge of culture (including literature), no one could be a good FL teacher or a good FL learner.

Language Enrichment

The study of literature in CLT classes provides meaningful opportunities and motivation both for learning new vocabulary items contained within the texts and for putting them into practice in classroom discussions. Traditionally, many ELF teachers have been concerned about the "impractical" quality of literary language, often focusing their attention on "poetic" language that is considered "flowery" and "esoteric," and therefore essentially different from the language used in our daily lives. As Collie and Slater observe, these teachers object that "literature does not give learners the kind of vocabulary they really need" (Collie and Slater 1987: 4). In spite of this "common sense" concern, the preponderance of research has found that literature offers a vast treasure of language resources in authentic contexts where both lexical and syntactic items are made all the more vivid and memorable. Hall notes that "literary language cuts across dichotomies like spoken/written (oral/literal) and formal/informal," and he comes to the following conclusion:

"Literature is made of, from, and with ordinary language, which is itself already surprisingly literary" (Hall 2015: 10–11). It is metaphor, in particular, that serves as the formative material for both daily conversational language and so-called literary language. As Hall states, "The evidence indicates that metaphor is a central, not a peripheral feature of language use, and that overall, much language, whether in everyday life or in literature, does not mean what it says (Hall 2015: 36). Or as Carter has put it, "The fundamental roots of language are figurative" (Carter 1999: 205). Thus, concerns that some teachers have about vocabulary when they are teaching literature in the language classroom are likely to be dispelled through experience. When students engage the texts in close reading and are drawn into the fictional worlds the works create, they are likely to focus less on specific vocabulary items and more on the stories themselves. As Collie and Slater suggest, "Pinpointing what individual words or phrases may mean becomes less important than pursuing the development of the story" (Collie and Slater 1987: 6).

Personal Involvement

When we consider using literary texts in CLT classes, it is clear that having students read well-chosen stories and poems and then discuss their responses can provide high levels of interest and motivation. Aside from the obvious benefits that can be derived in a positive classroom environment, Collie and Slater point out that "Engaging imaginatively with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system (Collie and Slater 1987: 5). Because literary texts are by nature open to a variety of interpretations, the experience of reading a text and then sharing their own ideas provides students with the opportunity to consider and commu-

nicate their own perceptions and opinions. When the experience is successful, students will relate the characters, events, and themes that they discover in a text to themselves and their own lives. Without question, such an experience can allow for a powerful learning experience, and in regard to the classroom, it opens the possibilities for a wide variety of communicative activities. In terms of students' personal development, engaging positively with literary texts can work "to stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities, and to increase their emotional awareness" (Lazar 1993: 19). In a 2015 interview, Maley stated that "Literature opens doors on cultural difference and scope for exploring cross-cultural awareness. It is also argued that literature helps learners to make sense of the world and of themselves within it: that they 'grow' personally through exposure to literature" (Constantinides).

Further Reasons to Teach English Language through Literature: Alan Maley

Maley (1989: 12) discusses seven benefits that the study of literature can provide in the study of language. They are frequently cited in pedagogical research to support the teaching of literature in the language classroom.

1. Universality
2. Non-triviality
3. Personal Relevance
4. Variety
5. Interest
6. Economy and Suggestive Power
7. Ambiguity

A brief comment on each benefit will shed further light on its merits with

regard to the study of literature in the CLT context.

1. Universality

   Literature deals with themes that affect everyone, irrespective of place and time. Some examples are love, fear, hope, death, disappointment, and joy. In some sense, literature can work like a "time machine."

2. Non-triviality

   Because literary works deal primarily with human experience, by nature they have significance. In addition, the texts are authentic in the sense of not having been constructed specifically for educational purposes.

3. Personal Relevance

   Assuming the texts selected for study are appropriate to the students, literary works allow readers to relate them to their own lives and reflect on their own experiences as a result.

4. Variety

   It goes without saying that literary works offer an endless variety of subjects, characters, and themes.

5. Interest

   A key aspect of this benefit is the concept of narrative. As the old saying goes, "Everyone loves a good story."

6. Economy and Suggestive Power

   Literature is in some part based on the idea of metaphor, and in the language classroom this provides ample opportunities for considering how an author can "Say one thing but mean another," for example.

7. Ambiguity

   Because we all interpret literary works in our own unique way, for the language classroom literature provides abundant opportunities for the interchange of interpretations and other ideas. This functions to

generate lively discussions among students who are eager to learn their classmates' ideas and to express their own.

Further Reasons to Teach English Language through Literature: Penny Ur

Ur (1991: 201) outlines ten benefits of literature in the EFL classroom. Similar to Maley's seven, they have become foundational in the field. The benefits as written are self-explanatory, so individual commentary is not necessary. However, it should be noted that No. 5 directly indicates the power of literature to generate spoken and written communication on the part of students in the classroom.

1. Literature is a very enjoyable resource to learn a language.
2. Literature provides examples of different styles of writing, and also representations of various authentic uses of the language.
3. Literature is a good resource for increasing word power.
4. It encourages developing various reading skills in learners.
5. It can be used as a springboard for exciting discussion or writing.
6. It involves both emotions and intellect, which adds to the motivation and may contribute to the personal development of the student.
7. English literature (in general) is a part of the target culture, and therefore it has a value as part of the learners' general education.
8. It encourages critical and creative thinking.
9. It enriches the students' world knowledge.
10. It makes the students aware of various human situations and conflicts.

Selection of Literary Texts for Use in the Language Classroom

What works of fiction, poetry, drama, and other "literary" materials

can be used effectively for study in the CLT context? In selecting materials, teachers should consider issues of comprehensibility, interest, and application within the framework of their curriculum and specific courses. The problem of what materials to use is more complicated, of course, when the students' English language level is low (Widdowson 1983: 31). The texts chosen should expose students to good works without intimidating them to the point that they will lose interest in literature altogether, even though it is natural for EFL students to be hesitant and lacking in confidence at first. The works should be well-suited to the study of such aspects of literature as character, plot, setting, theme, and point of view. And they should be works that allow students to relate the characters and events to themselves in some significant ways. Students will be best motivated to study literature when their emotions and attitudes are engaged. Texts that are likely to engage the interests of the learners and their attention and feelings should be chosen (Widdowson 1983: 32). Brumfit notes that "Of equal importance, however, is the choice of texts that lend themselves to student discussion and personal experience" (1986: 32). Of course, texts that are extremely difficult either in regard to language or cultural content are unlikely to work well. Carter and Long (1991: 5) suggest, "As a general rule, it is better to choose for teaching literary texts which are not too far beyond the students' normal reading comprehension." In terms of practical matters, Lazar (1993: 55) comments that when selecting literary texts, teachers should consider whether they have enough time available to work on texts in class, how much time students have to work on the text at home (reading) and how much background information about the text the teacher needs to give students. The first-time teacher of literature in the CLT context would be advised to choose very short texts, such as short-short stories and short poems, for the first lessons in order to gauge the amount of time needed

for various tasks in the classroom. In general, students react well to very short texts in the first few lessons, and then they adapt well to gradually increasing the length as the course continues. As the goals for the lessons are a combination of reading literary works followed by the sharing of ideas about those works, it is of course ultimately a question of balance, and this is likely to be one of the issues that resolve themselves as the teacher gains experience in teaching literature in this context.

METHODOLOGY

With the dual linguistic and literary goals of helping our students become proficient readers of English and also effective communicators of their own ideas in spoken and written English, the question of methodology comes: How do we plan, organize, and implement our English literature courses in the CLT context? We can begin by looking at some good practices as outlined by Nystrand (1991):

A "Good" Literature Teacher

- numerous authentic teacher questions, open-ended, not pseudo-questions or "testing"
- discussion of literature in terms of students' own experience
- "uptake" — incorporation of previous students' answers or comments into subsequent teachers questions
- deliberate relation of individual works to other readings
- ample time for discussion, reflection, small group tasks

(Adapted from Nystrand, "Making it Hard: Curriculum and Instruction as Factors in the Difficulty of Literature" in Purves (ed.) 1991: 141-56)

It is not the purpose of this article to serve as an instruction manual for teaching literature in the CLT context, especially considering that

there are abundant resources available both in print and online. However, some basic assumptions are as follows: 1) The class will be student-centered rather than teacher-centered, although the instructor will likely introduce literary texts, authors, literary conventions and terminology, and pertinent background information through lectures; 2) The primary language used in the classroom will be English, although students may need to use their native language from time to time to clarify points among themselves; 3) Students will take responsibility for reading the texts either before class or (in the case of very short texts) during class sessions; 4) Such activities as pair work and group work will be conducted in addition to whole-class discussions and student presentations; 5) Both the instructor and the students should keep in mind that the aim of the lessons is to explore, appreciate, and discuss literary texts in English with the ultimate goal of helping students attain proficiency in English.

The "Literary Circles" Approach

In keeping with these assumptions, an approach to the study of literature in the CLT context that has been growing in popularity is the "Literary Circles" method. Also known as "Reading Circles," they involve students in small reading group activities as they discuss literary texts. In Japan, the leading proponent is Professor Mark Furr of Yokohama City University (Furr 2007: 15). He has developed six roles for each group: 1. Discussion Leader, 2. Summarizer, 3. Connector, 4. Word Master, 5. Passage Person, and 6. Culture Collector (Furr 2007: 17–18).

The key responsibilities for each role in the Literary Circle are as follows:

1) Discussion Leader: Prepares five questions about the text; in class, keeps the discussion flowing smoothly and makes sure that every group member participates.

2) Summarizer: Makes notes about the characters, events, and ideas; in class, retells the story (in one or two minutes) in his or her own words.

3) Connector: Looks for connections between the story and the world outside; in class, tells the group about the connections and asks for comments or questions, including any other connections group members have found.

4) Word Master: Looks for words or short phrases that are new, difficult, or important for the story; in class, explains the meaning of five key words.

5) Passage Person: Finds important, interesting, or difficult passages, making notes about three key passages that are important in regard to plot, character, or language; in class, reads the passages out loud and asks the group members' one or two questions about each passage.

6) Culture Collector: Looks for both differences and similarities between the students' culture and the culture found in the story, making notes on three key passages; in class, reads the passages to the group and asks questions about them.

(Adapted from Furr 2007: 15-18)

The process begins with each student reading the text (usually outside of class) from the viewpoint of his or her role in the group. Then the group meets to exchange information and ideas about the text. Furr notes that, "Because Japanese students have often had very unsatisfactory encounters with reading and literature in English, using a method that simultaneously promotes general reading comprehension, reading fluency, and interesting discussion allows students to discover both that they are able to read literature in English and that it can even be a rewarding experi-

ence" (Furr 2004: 2). According to Furr, "Students are able to discuss issues in English and to solve problems in collaboration with their peers that they could not possibly deal with on their own" (Furr 2007: 20). Key to the success of Literary Circles is that the entire process is a student-centered, content-based, collaborative project that involves students in a four-skills context. The following key conditions are necessary for creating the ideal setting and circumstances for Literary Circles, according to Furr (2007: 16–17):

1. Teachers select reading material appropriate for their students.
2. Small temporary groups are formed in the classroom.
3. Different groups read the same text.
4. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.
5. Students use written notes to guide both their reading and their discussion.
6. Discussion topics come from the students.
7. Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about stories.
8. The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.
9. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.

The merits of Literary Circles have been widely discussed in published articles in recent years; aside from the obvious benefits of engaging students in reading and discussion, many teachers have noted that participation in this set of activities has helped students develop a stronger sense of learner autonomy. Noll has noted that Literary Circles are "powerful because students direct their own learning" (1994: 92). In regard to the overall classroom environment, Burns states that the activities "can change the classroom climate to be more cooperative, responsible, and

pleasurable" (1998: 124). Similarly, Li has noted that the group work can be very effective in building relationships based on trust between students (Li 2005: 128).

In my own experience with teaching literature in a CLT context at two universities in Japan, I have not yet fully implemented the Literary Circles approach in regard to assigned roles within each group. I have found that Japanese university students cooperate and collaborate extremely well within groups as they discuss literary texts, and I am eager to assign each group member a specific role to find out if they perform even better in that context.

Conclusion

There are many good reasons for university English teachers to consider using literary texts as the basis of CLT classes. The study of literature allows for a rich variety of experience, learning, and practice, and literary studies also create opportunities and motivation for students to work "with" and "in" the English language. In addition to the benefits of learning about the values and themes presented in literary texts, students are given abundant reasons to communicate with each other as they discuss and share their own reactions and opinions. In considering these merits, it is important to keep in mind that students who successfully complete a communicative course in English literature are certain to gain a keen sense of accomplishment that can only serve to provide even further motivation as they continue to study, learn, practice, and use the English language.

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(1) See, for example, "The Rise of Aliteracy" and "the Survey of Basic

Academic Skills of the Students at Bukkyo University." According to the survey, more than half of the first year English majors from 2011–14 had read few books for three years at high school (20). Some 95 % of the first year English majors do not know about the Brontës, some 89 %, about Jane Austin, and 88 %, about J. D. Salinger (Matsumoto 5–6).

(2) "Haruki Murakami: How a Japanese writer conquered the world." His popularity is often compared with that of J. K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter.

(3) Adapted from Lazar's (1993) List of Cultural Aspects in Literary Texts

- Objects or products that exist in one society but not in another
- Proverbs, idioms, formulaic expressions which embody cultural values
- Social structures, roles and relationships
- Customs/rituals/traditions/festivals
- Beliefs, values, superstitions
- Political, historic and economic background
- Institutions
- Taboos
- Metaphorical/connotative meanings
- Humour
- Representativeness – to what slice of a culture or society the text refers to
- Genre
- Written language status

(65–67)

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